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ABSTRACT

The apparent difficulty of students of French as a second language to acquire French vocabulary is examined, drawing on experience with teaching Irish university students and the structures and stylistic traits peculiar to French. It is noted that while certain kinds of words (noun, verb, adjective, adverb) occupy little space in text, they take up the most room in a dictionary, and conversely, while others (pronoun, preposition, determiner, conjunction) use much space in text and relatively little in dictionaries. Grammar (structure) and vocabulary are also often taught separately, with grammar receiving more attention. It is proposed that vocabulary deficit has two causes: (1) the obvious word is not always obvious at all; and (2) meaning does not always reside within single words. These concepts are expanded upon and illustrated. It is suggested that while having students keep a list of vocabulary words is a classic technique and using picture dictionaries is handy for concrete vocabulary, a more useful technique is for students to begin with "obvious" words (e.g., "ferme") and cluster around them related terms (e.g., "exploitation, exploitation agricole, recolte, vendange, culture," etc.). This more expansive system for developing vocabulary may be more effective than the conventional linear approach. (MSE)

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French vocabulary - looking for 'le mot juste'

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Much of what follows is specifically concerned with French. It is born of teaching experience, which tends to demonstrate that Irish students enter university with little vocabulary, and often leave with not much more. Although some of this may be applicable to other languages or other teaching situations, much is concerned with structures and stylistic traits peculiar to French.

The obvious way of measuring the importance of a word is to see how frequent it is in a text. There are problems associated with this. One is that the most important words in French are *le, la, de, que* and so on.

One way out is to look at different categories of words: it is convenient - though not strictly accurate - to tell students that there are eight types. This is possible if one ignores the existence of exclamations like 'eh hop!', 'aïe!' or even 'ouïlle!' This voluntary amnesia is motivated by the pedagogical desire to have equal-sized, neatly symetrical categories, and produces two balanced groups of four:

firstly: *noun, verb, adjective, adverb* (semantically 'full'; open series)

secondly: *pronoun, preposition, determiner, conjunction* (semantically 'empty', closed series providing grammatical information such as function of word or relationship between words in first series).

It is the second group that occupies so much space in any text. Conversely, the first group takes up most room in the dictionary. One might say that the first group is 'semantically full' (to which most people will assent) while the second is 'semantically empty' (to which people will not agree without rather severe reservations). Less tendentiously, one could say that the first group is

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an 'open series' (with any and possibly a growing number of entries) while the second (articles, prepositions and the like) is made up exclusively of closed series (all of which may be known).

While the second group accounts for the most frequent occurrences in a text, therefore, the first group accounts for the greatest number of dictionary entries. When people speak of vocabulary or lexis, it is generally of the first group (noun, verb, adjective, adverb) that they speak, while the closed series (pronoun, preposition, determiner, conjunction) account for much of what is taught - insofar as it is taught - under 'grammar'.

Here it becomes necessary to present views which are very much open to challenge, and in what follows immediately, it is not the author's intention to correct the popular view but to try to define it, so as to be able to demonstrate some of the consequences of such a view.

The bipartite division of 'grammar' (often cloaked with as much intellectual respectability as may be lent by the word 'structure') and 'vocabulary' seems to subtend many courses. There is often an unspoken presumption that 'structure' is more important than 'vocabulary' because once the outline structure of the language is understood, the learner is free to 'fill it out' with as much or as little vocabulary as he/she wishes. It is not obvious why the proposition cannot be inverted to read 'once the learner has a few thousand words to his/her credit, he/she can put in a bit of structure'. However, the precedence accorded to structure is either a cause or an effect of the fact that people seem much better at teaching grammar than vocabulary, and the metalanguage that goes with it is well understood to the teachers, whatever about the pupils. Words, on the other hand, seem to come in off-putting lists or worrying avalanches.

Not surprisingly, people wanted to find an easy place to start, as with 'le français fondamental'. The problems associated with this project - ensuring that it was a starting rather than an end point, finding authentic material etc. - are too well charted for it to be pointful to go into them further here. However, these word lists do perhaps retain some interest as a diagnostic or research tool.

Whatever about one's declared views as a linguist, teacher or practitioner, whatever theoretical positions one may adopt, there is reason to believe that

some of the underlying assumptions about 'le français fondamental' subsist. Especially the view that 'you've got to start somewhere'. And so, by the nature of things, you have. Common sense will dictate that *eau* is more essential than *aquatique*, *nautique* or *humidification*. The question is: 'How far and how long do you have to choose?'

Secondary and third-level attitudes may well be divergent, but together conspire to leave this problem unsolved.

At secondary level, there seems to be a feeling that the 'important' or 'basic' words should be dealt with first, so that at least candidates will have minimal equipment to pass the Leaving Certificate. The notion that some words are more important than others - understandable as it may be - in effect brings us back, even if only in an informal way, to something like the discredited 'Français fondamental'.

The university view is not minimalist in its objectives, though arguably minimalist in its effects. As the third-level is the final part of a student's education, it is only natural to feel that it should lead to some kind of end-point. Just as the starting point is zero knowledge, so the end-point ought to be total knowledge, or 'all of French'. The fact that grammar (structure) is seen as the major problem area often leads to a situation where all classes (writing, translation etc.) in fact turn into grammar classes, and students fall by their chronic inability to make simple agreements, or conjugate any but *-er* verbs. A complete knowledge of vocabulary is desired, wished, but not meaningfully taught.

Thus, it is as if secondary teaching concentrated near to the starting point, and third-level near to the end-point, leaving an unaccounted-for hiatus in between.

In this author's view, the vocabulary deficit may be in large measure accounted for by two things:

a) the obvious word is not always as obvious as all that
b) meaning does not always reside within single words

These propositions need to be expanded further, explained and illustrated.

The obvious word is not always as obvious as all that

In an unspoken way, the notion that there is an obvious word for a given 'thing' is subtended by a notion of translation, on the model 'x is how you say y in French'. At a stage when translation is not at all practised at secondary level, and not always even in the first years at university, then, it has a kind of after-life in the unspoken assumption that for any English word, there must be a single serviceable French equivalent. All university teachers will have encountered pieces of undergraduate French where the very un-French text becomes understandable once one translates each word individually into English; clearly, the student has in effect been translating his own text, but most probably not consciously so: just using the very English conceptual units with which he/she is equipped. Improved communicative teaching approaches have not lead to any diminution of the view that words in different languages correspond on a simple 'one to one' basis. Arguably, greater translation practice might actually improve the situation rather than the reverse, if it were undertaken as an exercise in contrastive linguistics.

First, a few simple examples. A friend remembers starting French with a master who was a recycled Greek teacher, and who announced: 'Today, boys, we're doing "ether" the French verb "to be".' The pronunciation has changed, but not always much else. Thus from an early stage, the idea that 'to be' = 'être' takes root. Both 'être' and 'to be' either mean 'to exist' or serve as auxiliaries. However, the frequency of pronominal verbs or intransitives that form the 'passé composé' with 'être' in French means that the verb 'être' is, in any event, to be found in abundance in any French text. Where the verb means 'to exist', there is a good chance another verb will be used, quite probably 'exister'. But also: *constituer, représenter, offrir l'exemple de, se trouver, s'avérer.*

Here are just a few examples:

'elle représentait la plus haute juridiction du pays'

'l'autorité royale dans l'ouest de la péninsule se trouva soudain gravement compromise'

In the following example, the verb 'être' occurs once, but could have occurred twice:

'Le Balp fut assassiné par traîtrise par le marquis de Montgaillard, et les plans se trouvèrent désorganisés'

'Elles pourraient même s'avérer plus fécondes'.

If 'être' is often avoided because of its use as an auxilliary, one would expect the same to be true of 'avoir' and that indeed is the case, 'posséder' as well as 'offrir' are used.

The verb 'faire' is also a (modal) auxilliary, but is equally very freuently used in set expressions like: 'faire double emploi', 'faire illusion', 'faire grâce de' - and dozens more besides. So in the sense of 'to make' a better choice would be 'effectuer', 'entreprendre': 'on effectue un voyage', 'on entreprend ou poursuit des recherches'. For the act of making, 'créer' may be appropriate: 'he made a garden' = 'il créa un jardin'.

The verb 'aller', now also an auxilliary in expressions like 'nous allons voir' is often replaced when real movement is involved by 'se rendre' or even 'voyager'. An example:

Le président Herriot, qui se rendait à Vannes pour y prononcer un discours officiel, se trouva immobilisé pendant plusieurs heures dans la gare d'Ingrandes.

Another verb that ought to give rise to no problems is 'dire'. Thus, students will write: 'Le journal dit...' or 'le gouvernement dit...'. This seems artless, crude and somehow wrong, without one's quite being able to say why. However French possess a whole raft of verbs each of which has its own special use: 'déclarer' = 'to say in public', 'proclamer' = 'to say in public in the hope of being heard', 'annoncer' = 'to reveal something not previously known', 'affirmer' = 'to make a statement while claiming it to be true', 'prétendre' = 'to put and defend a point of view', 'soutenir' = 'to forward an argument'. In addition to the aforementioned, there are periphrases like 'donner à entendre à qqn', 'laisser croire que'. Whereas English has a large vocabulary, it is not necessarily an error of style to use 'simple' words like 'to have', 'to go' and 'to say'. Though French may have a smaller vocabulary, such words as it does have at its disposal are, it seems, used more, and not using the 'mot juste' - choosing the right item of the available list - gives a peculiar effect of impoverishment and foreignness.

Just one more example: the verb 'donner' may (indeed) mean 'to give', but 'il m'a donné un cadeau' sounds wrong - or at least uneasy - for 'il m'a offert un cadeau' or the sentence best rendered as 'Shall I gift wrap it?': 'C'est pour offrir?'.

The ideas just outlined were born of the reflection that what seem like very obvious words - what may, indeed, once have been the 'best' word to use, live on abroad in a way they no longer do in France. Thus, 'ferme' and 'fermier' for 'farm' and 'farmer'. Only rarely are these used in ordinary conversation on in the media. It is probably statistically the case that 'exploitation' and 'agriculteur' are the most used terms. No doubt this is a manifestation of a well-charted willingness among the French to incorporate scientific or learned terms into ordinary discourse. Another similar pair are 'université' and 'faculté': both terms should be used, though students will prefer the more 'English' 'université'. If asked, would one say 'je suis professeur' or 'je suis dans l'enseignement'? Although one might say 'je suis prof(esseur) de français' alongside 'j'enseigne le français'. Periphrastic expressions (like 'établissement scolaire' rather than 'école') will be examined in a moment.

Martinet rightly says that a language is an analysis of reality, because each language divides up reality differently. But we do not always find cognizance taken of this in teaching. Thus the (obvious) word for 'book' is 'livre'. Yet this ignores a whole series, some of which might be considered synonyms for 'livre' and others most definitely would not: *livre, tome, volume, ouvrage, manuel, cahier, calepin*. There is a list of criteria in each case (here: printed or not, one of a series or not, hinged at top of side etc. etc.). One more totally random example before we press on: the English pair 'pond'/'lake' are distinguished by size. The French series 'étang', 'bassin', 'mare', 'lac', 'pièce d'eau' are distinguished in addition by the criteria: beautiful or not, natural or artificial.

Meaning does not always reside within single words

Martinet talks of the 'double articulation' of language. Sounds go together to make words, and words go together to make sentences. This 'double' articulation does not, in fact, leave us with two levels of analysis, but three: phonetics, lexis and syntax. In fact, though, there is an important and neglected missing level. Words combine to make meaningful units in exactly the same way as sounds do. These syntagms function within the sentence like words, but are not listed in ordinary dictionaries or much taught. We are familiar with the X de Y structure. Here are a few chosen from a text:

voie de passage; Parlement de Bretagne; quartier de la cathédrale

However, many of these syntagms are such frequent collocations that they may be considered lexicalised:

chemin de fer, salle à manger, boîte à lettres etc.

Not only are there noun collocations, of course, but also verbal phrases which are, perhaps, less well understood:

prendre sa retraite, se rendre compte, s'inscrire en faux etc.

Sentences like the following are likely to give rise to problems:

L'état y gagnerait certes, pour qui une opération de transferts initialement neutres se solderait finalement par des rentrées nettes. Mais ni le bien-être des enfants ni l'égalité sociale ni trouveraient leur compte.

There are a number of of frequent tropes in these collocations: one is like 'étoffement' or 'padding out' in translation:

parents = *parents d'élèves*

The other is a kind of periphrasis similar to that examined below under 'elegant variations':

école = *établissement scolaire*

Principals will then, of course, be called *'chefs d'établissement'*.

Those raised on Fowler's 'The King's English' will recall the strictures he reserves for 'elegant variations'. By this, he means finding another, less obvious way of saying something, to avoid frequent repetition. In this matter, French and English are at variance. It is a principle of French style that repetition should be avoided, and the rule is drummed in at school. At one level, this means that there are known equivalences, much overused in journalism:

la langue de Molière	*le français*
la langue de Shakespeare	*l'anglais*
le métal jaune	*l'or*

l'hexagone	*la France*
l'auteur du Cid	*Corneille*
le septième art	*le cinéma*
nos voisins d'outre-Manche	*les Anglais*

One is at liberty not to like these, but one will not get far reading if they are unknown.

Part of the problem may stem from the fact that in the English-speaking world, first-(native-)language teaching lays considerable stress on self-expression and originality, whereas we are dealing in French with a target language whose culture would give much greater emphasis to competent conformity. The idea that one is free to put words together in any conceivable combination is romantic, noble, perhaps, but misconceived: sentences like: 'Les briques boivent du vin mauve' are rare except in poetry. In practice, the range of different vocabulary items a given word collocates with is restricted. Often, one word will suggest another:

parvenir à un **accord** = se mettre d'accord
conclure un **accord** = se mettre d'accord
signer un **accord** = se mettre d'accord
un **accord** est intervenu = un accord s'est produit
réserver un **accueil** favorable à = approuver
réserver un **accueil** chaleureux à = souhaiter la bienvenue/approuver
faire **appel** à (des compétences) = les invoquer/exploiter
donner l'**assurance** de qqch à qqn = assurer qqn de qqch
s'**attarder** à faire qqch = y passer du temps
porter **atteinte** à = faire subir un préjudice
faire/prêter **attention** à qqn/qqch = écouter, étudier
adopter une **attitude** vis-à-vis de = agir de telle ou telle façon
ressentir/éprouver un **besoin** = désirer
le **bruit** court = la rumeur circule
brûler des étapes = aller rapidement à son but
dans le **cadre** de = dans le contexte de
revêtir le **caractère** de = avoir le caractère de/être
se porter **candidat** = poser sa candidature
poser sa **candidature** = postuler un emploi
donner **carte** blanche à qqn = lui donner la liberté d'agir à sa guise

donner libre **champ** à qqn = ne pas les gêner ou contraindre dans leurs décisions
d'un **commun** accord = avec l'assentiment général

One could list hundreds of examples of these 'expressions figées' half way between word and phrase without being exhaustive. In part, the difficulty is that it is difficult to draw a precise line between habitual collocations and locutions or gallicisms. How, for example, might one qualify the following?

*rendre l'**âme** = mourir*
*jeter l'**ancre** = s'arrêter*
*lever l'**ancre** = partir*
*ne pas être dans son **assiette** = souffrir d'un malaise*
*chausser ses **bésicles** = mettre ses lunettes*
***brûler** des étapes = aller rapidement à son but*
*à **cor** et à cri = avec beaucoup de bruit*

It would be wrong to haggle over the usefulness of these expressions: if you are reading about elections without knowing that 'aller aux urnes' means 'to vote', you have problems, and any authentic material will contain this kind of expression.

Often, habitual collocations are a manifestation of the French predilection for nominalisation. Although our closely related western-European languages have the same parts of speech, it is a regrettable by-product of the translation mentality that seems to have survived the death of translation as a widely-used academic exercise that students expect to be able to use the same part of speech in the target as in the source language - verb-for-verb, noun-for-noun and so on. Only too frequently, where a verb might plausibly be used, French prefers a phrase made up of a noun and a (frequently used - a rather neutral) verb:

***apporter** des modifications à*	*modifier*
***avoir** recours*	*recourir*
***avoir** la conviction*	*être convaincu*
***donner** l'assurance*	*assurer*
***donner** avis*	*informer*
***donner** son accord*	*approuver*
***donner** lieu à*	*causer, susciter*

***effectuer** un recensement*	*recenser*
***émettre** le vœu*	*souhaiter*
***être/se trouver** dans l'impossibilité*	*ne pas pouvoir*
***être** en mesure de*	*pouvoir*
***faire** l'acquisition de*	*acheter*
***se livrer** à l'examen de*	*examiner*
***opposer** un refus à*	*refuser*
***porter** atteinte à*	*nuire*
***porter** qqch à la connaissance de qqn*	*informer*
***prendre** en considération*	*tenir compte*
***prendre** note, acte*	*noter*
***venir** à expiration*	*expirer*

Some conclusions

There are some aspects of the vocabulary problem which have not been considered here in order to make the exposition simple. Among the dimensions not explored are things like the fact that French is characterised by a complex system of registers: not only may students have to deal with a high-flown or administrative style, but also with a familiar register. The view that a good neutral style is best to start off with does not make much sense when one considers that any contact with France will bring them into contact with both. To say that 'billet' is the best all-round word for ticket, for example, does not make much sense when both the words 'ticket' and 'titre de transport' are in official use. Similarly, it is unlikely that any student visiting France could long be insulated from the spoken register of French. However, these considerations - important as they are - in no way detract from the two main points made here: the notional 'obvious word' may well not be, and much current vocabulary is accounted for by syntagms or groups larger than the word.

There is clearly a vocabulary deficit among our students on intake. It has, in our university, not been been made good three or four years later. The classic advice is to encourage students to keep a list of words they meet and do not understand. In many ways, such a list will be inadequate, because of being insufficiently cross-referenced. A good way round this is by the use of a flexible data-base. However, where equipment or computer literacy are lacking, structures or groups of words around a nucleus are needed. For example, around 'vouloir' one might group 'émettre/formuler le vœu' and perhaps 'témoigner la volonté de', and alongside this group 'désirer', and

'souhaiter', and around them 'exprimer le/un désir', 'exprimer le/un souhait'. Similarly, around 'chemin de fer', the adjective 'ferroviaire' and the expression 'voie ferrée', linked to 'réseau ferroviaire', 'grandes lignes'. To 'train', we might link 'TGV', 'rame', 'express', 'autorail', 'omnibus' and 'convoi' as well as syntagms like 'train de marchandises', 'train de voyageurs', 'train direct' and so on. As well as linking words, it is often necessary to compare and contrast as in 'légal', 'légitime', 'juridique', 'conforme à la loi', or in the series 'fin', 'bout', 'terme', 'achèvement', 'parachèvement', and the slightly different adjectival serie: 'fini', 'terminé', 'mené à bien', 'mené à son terme', 'achevé', 'parachevé', 'parfait', 'perfectionné'. In these cases the words are not always interchangeable, but close enough for it to be worthwhile considering them together.

Picture dictionaries, like the excellent, but now aging Duden, or the more modern Harraps Visual list related words in close proximity and are invaluable for concrete vocabulary. But more than concrete vocabulary is required.

Although words need to be grouped together in structures, there is no single structure that is objectively 'right' or 'best'. That is why the flexible database would seem not only to be best in practice, but also best in theory. But if boring, old-fashioned paper is to be used, a good starting point is the 'obvious' word mentioned earlier, and which may, or may not be the best way of saying a particular thing. Thus, around 'ferme', would cluster 'exploitation', 'exploitation agricole'. 'Récolte' (=the product of the land and the end of the season) could be contrasted with 'vendange' (used only of grapes) and 'culture' (a certain category of plants while growing). The series 'viticulture', 'pomiculture', 'sériculture', 'pisciculture', 'ostréiculture' could follow. Diverse syntagms involving 'élevage', could figure, with the pairs 'vache'/'race bovine', 'cochon'/'race porcine', 'mouton'/'race ovine' indispensable, not only for dealing with Brussels, but even reading the economic press.

The point of this system is not that it brings instant enlightenment - that would be too much to hope or promise - but that it holds out the possibility of ultimate enlightenment because it can grow. Whereas the linear word list just gets longer, and ultimately becomes unwieldy and has to be discarded, this kind of vocabulary work gets denser, but even after several years is still centred around the same basic areas of meaning, of nuclei.

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